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Why Afghanistan Is Once Again On The Brink

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President Ashraf Ghani (right) and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah (left) leave after signing a power-sharing deal in September 2014 at the presidential palace in Kabul. Afghanistan's National Unity Government is now in disarray.

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Massoud Hossaini/AP

If you drive around Kabul long enough, you will eventually see what must be the most cheerful slogan in Afghanistan.

Cars traverse the city bearing a happy little window sticker about the best way to approach life in a country beset by deep — and, in the eyes of most Afghans, worsening — trouble.

"Enjoy Today!" it reads. "Forget Tomorrow!"

That's harder than it sounds.

This reality came into sharp relief last month when the Taliban killed 64 people, and injured more than 340, in a large, complex bombing and shooting attack that targeted the Afghan national security agency.

The fact that the militants could cause such mayhem in a supposedly high-security area in the center of the capital added to a crescendo of criticism leveled at Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani.

It also strengthened a growing consensus among international and Afghan observers that the "national unity government" that Ghani leads, under an agreement cobbled together after a botched 2014 election, is at risk of collapse.

Ghani, a former World Bank official with a reputation as one of the world's finer intellects, faces a monumental task if he is to prevent his government from being overwhelmed by the crises facing Afghanistan.

"We didn't ask for war, and we never seek war," Ghani declared in a speech shortly after the Kabul bombing. "But if they impose the war on us, we will fight."

His government was "united," he said — though that is widely disputed.

The crises facing the Afghan government are multiple. The Afghan economy is tanking. The national currency, the afghani, has lost 20 percent against the dollar in a year. Several hundred thousand Afghans, many of whom are young and middle-class, have left for Europe in search of jobs, education and security.

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The scene following an April 19 suicide attack in Kabul. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

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Rahmat Gul/AP

The war with the Taliban is widening. Civilian casualties are on the rise. Large parts of the landscape are outside the government's control. Peace negotiations remain a distant dream. Corruption is rampant.

As you drive around Kabul, evidence of how this general instability is affecting the lives of Afghans is everywhere.

The roads have become home to a multitude of checkpoints, police, soldiers, armed guards and buildings wrapped in razor wire and meter-thick concrete blast barriers. Women in blue burqas and haggard men on crutches continue to beg on the streets, despite the tens of billions in foreign aid poured into this city.

For a long time, Kabul was fairly safe for foreigners. They ate in cafes and restaurants. Now you're about as likely to see a Western diplomat strolling the streets as a polar bear. "They're locked up, basically," Kerry Jane Wilson said in an interview with NPR in March.

Last Thursday, Wilson, a charity worker, was abducted from the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad, reportedly by two men posing as government intelligence officials.

Wilson has worked in Afghanistan for 20 years, most recently with a charity organization that helps impoverished Afghan women become entrepreneurs — for example, by producing and selling handicrafts.

Until recently, it helped administer an arts and crafts shop called Ganjina, a showcase for Afghan artisans that was hugely popular with foreigners. A few weeks ago, the deteriorating security situation forced Ganjina to close its doors for the last time; there were barely any visitors.

Failing To Deliver

Over the years, Afghanistan has faded from the world headlines, overshadowed by other, bloodier wars. Now some heavy-hitter foreign policy makers are raising the alarm anew — and in blunt terms.

In February, James R. Clapper, the director of National Intelligence, warned that Afghanistan is at "serious risk of a political breakdown" in 2016.

He spoke of "waning political cohesion, increasingly assertive local power brokers, financial shortfalls and sustained countrywide Taliban attacks."

In March, the United Nations envoy to Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, told the Security Council it would be an "achievement" if the Afghan government survives the year, citing similar concerns.

One of the Afghan government's most basic vulnerabilities is the weak foundation on which it's built. In 2014, Afghanistan held a presidential election. A furious dispute erupted over the outcome, fueled by allegations of fraud.

Secretary of State John Kerry intervened, brokering a deal in which the two candidates shared power. Ashraf Ghani became president. His election rival, Abdullah Abdullah, was made chief executive officer, a position created by presidential decree.

This power-sharing deal was enshrined in a signed agreement. Its terms include a commitment to hold a *loya jirga*, a grand assembly of Afghan elders, within two years to debate amending the constitution and turning the post of CEO into prime minister.

That deadline expires in five months. Few Afghan experts believe there's much chance of a *loya jirga* being held within that time.

A relative weeps over the coffin of a victim killed in a Taliban truck bomb attack, at a funeral in Kabul on April 20. The attack, which took place a day earlier, tore through central Kabul and a fierce firefight broke out.

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Shah Marai/AFP/Getty Images

First, parliamentary and district council elections must take place, as *loya jirga* members are drawn from those bodies. Before elections can happen, electoral reforms are required to avoid a rerun of the 2014 debacle.

The government is already overwhelmed. It hasn't even managed to fill all of its Cabinet positions, says Michael Kugelman, senior associate for South and Southeast Asia at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

"Only a starry-eyed optimist could reasonably expect it to pass electoral reforms and hold local elections in just a few months," he says.

Yet failing to deliver on promises made when the government was cobbled together is risky. Ghani has many political enemies who can be expected to seize on this failure as evidence that his government has lost legitimacy. That, in turn, could trigger moves to oust his government.

"The state of play here is quite stark," says Kugelman. "A weak and fractured regime in Kabul faces a Herculean task, and yet unless it pulls off the seemingly impossible, the threats to its political survival could become too strong to overcome."

The situation is made still more precarious by another factor: No one seems sure of how long the government is meant to serve. The signed agreement is silent on this point.

Some Afghans are convinced that its term is two years — much to the alarm of the Obama administration, which sees this interpretation as further destabilizing. Kerry sought to douse this fire during a recent visit to Kabul. He categorically declared that the Afghan government's term is actually five years, although that's not stated in the agreement, either. Afghans accused the U.S. of interference in their internal affairs.

Warding Off Evil

It's rush hour in Kabul. A small boy called Abdul wanders through a traffic jam. He's carrying, on a string, a tin can containing burning seeds. He waves the can around; smoke gushes out. Abdul moves from car to car, engulfing each vehicle in a small acrid cloud.

As he does this, he recites an ancient verse about warding off evil. A driver hands him a few pennies. There's a belief among Afghans that smoke from these seeds, a kind of wild rue, protects them against ill fortune.

Young boys wave smoldering tin cans at cars in Kabul. The smoke from the seeds inside the cans is believed to ward off evil.

These days, there's no shortage of small boys with smoldering tin cans — and no shortage of ill fortune for them to keep at bay.

Anxiety hangs in the air in Kabul. Few people seem to think the Taliban can take total control of their country. Many fear the country might fracture; some worry it may return to the devastating civil war of the 1990s.

"I am afraid that if we don't take the right steps, this region will break up like Libya, and the Islamic State and Taliban will fill the vacuum," said Ahmad Saeedi, a Kabul-based political analyst and civil society activist.

Saeedi is skeptical about the government's chances for survival, and says infighting between the president and chief executive's offices is making matters worse.

"It is like a car with two steering wheels, driving in different directions," he says.

Later this year, Afghanistan will turn again to reluctant international donors for yet more funds. Officials will point to the progress the country has made in education, infrastructure, health services, the media and more.

There will also be warnings that if the West fails to provide needed support, Afghanistan could easily return to anarchy and civil war, and once again become a haven for al-Qaida and like-minded franchises.

You could argue that, when lobbying for more international money, being pessimistic is in the Afghans' interests. Yet the realities on the ground are hard to dispute.

To see that, just take a drive around Kabul.